

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

What are Eating Disorders in Adults¹

What are Eating Disorders?

Eating Disorders are disturbances in our eating behaviors. They are also feelings of distress and over extreme concern about our body image and weight. Eating disorders include unhealthy eating patterns like drastic reduction of food intake or extreme patterns of overeating sometimes followed by purging. Purging is a method of evacuating food consumed before it's digested by our body.

Eating Disorders may have serious and potentially life-threatening imbalances in the body and serious heart conditions which could lead to cardiac arrest. Frequently, eating disorders co-occur with other mental illnesses such as depression, alcoholism and substance abuse and anxiety disorders.

The National Institute for Mental Health estimates that 5 to 15% of people with anorexia or bulimia are male.

About 35% of those with binge eating disorders are men or boys.

This year, our legislators passed a "parity" law. For the first time ever, some of our medical insurance coverage must include mental health treatment as it does any other treatment. It's called "parity". It means if we have the flu, a broken leg, an anxiety disorder or diabetes, our public health providers are expected to care for all treatment on par, or equally, with each other.

Here are three of the most common Eating Disorders:

1. Anorexia Nervosa

With Anorexia we drastically reduce our food intake. We also have unusual eating habits which include:

- Avoiding meals
- Weighing foods
- Eating a few foods in small amounts
- Counting calories of everything that they eat

We might weigh ourselves, A LOT and constantly and engage in excessive exercise to try to control our weight.

2. Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia is a disease of secrets and silence. Feelings of disgust and shame at our behaviors are followed by extreme relief after purging. We frequently experience episodes of eating excessive amounts of food. Then, we almost immediately induce vomiting or use laxatives or diuretics to rid our bodies of the food we just ate.

Hurtful consequences related to bulimia are:

- Inflammation of the esophagus
- Peptic ulcers
- Tooth decay and staining
- Electrolyte imbalances

3. Binge Eating Disorder

Binge Eating Disorder is not associated with purging behaviors, but the binges are associated with at least three of the following:

- Eating more rapidly than normal
- Eating large amounts of food when not feeling physically hungry
- Eating until feeling uncomfortably full
- Eating alone because of embarrassment of the amount of food eaten
- Feeling disgusted and guilty after overeating

Causes of Eating Disorders We do not know what causes eating disorders. Our society does value and promote thinness as beauty. Unstable family relationships are also known to contribute to some peoples eating problems.

Look for these Warning Signs:

- A sudden increase or decrease in weight not tied to any medical condition.
- Abnormal eating habits such as severe dieting, preference for strange foods, withdrawn or ritualized behavior at mealtime or secretive bingeing and hoarding/hiding food and avoidance of meal time.
- An intense preoccupation with weight and body image.
- Compulsive or excessive exercising.
- Self-induced vomiting, periods of fasting, routinely taking laxatives, diet pills.
- Feeling isolated, depressed and irritable.
- Loss of menstrual periods with hair becoming reddish.
- Extreme fear of gaining weight and being "fat."
- Feeling "fat" despite a dramatic weight loss.

How Can Eating Disorders Be Treated?

The complex disorder needs comprehensive mental health treatment plans and a wide range of interventions like individual psychotherapy; group therapy; family or marriage/couples therapy.

Treatment Strategies include:

- Psychotherapy,
- Nutritional rehabilitation and counseling
- Psychosocial interventions
- Medication management strategies

With Anorexia, sometimes the first treatment goal is intervention in starvation with a goal of some weight gain instead of loss.

Medical treatment and hospitalization might be needed. Then, individual psychotherapy and family therapy can helps overcome a distorted thought and behavior pattern. Self-help groups in the community.

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² US Department of Health and Human Services on Women's Health